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Ambrotype Images

Thomas Feldvebel

AMBROTYPE IMAGES

by

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in the

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

of the

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Board Chairman: James Reilly

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The Ambrotype

"Ambrotypes are an old process, going back to the 1850's. In 1851 Frederick Scott Archer of England invented a collodion process. Collodion had been invented a few years earlier, in 1847, as a means of protecting the wounds of soldiers; it is a flexible, varnish-like substance made by dissolving guncotton in alcohol and ether. What Archer did was to use collodion to hold silver salts on a glass plate. His method was very similar to what Feldvebel does today, as explained in his Modern Manual of Ambrotyping, c. 1977. First, the plate must be polished with rottenstone to remove any scratches and produce a clean surface for the collodion to adhere to. Then the collodion with cadmium iodide in solution (earlier photographers used potassium iodide), is carefully poured over the plate to produce a thin film. The coated plate is put into a bath of silver nitrate to form silver iodide, sensitizing the plate to light; then it is placed in the camera and exposed. The exposed plate is developed in a solution of ferrous sulfate and glacial acetic acid. The plate is then rinsed in water and fixed in a solution of hypo to stop the developing. All of this, from the sensitizing of the plate until the final fixing, must be done in the dark, and before the collodion has dried. Glass negatives can be made this way and prints produced through contact printing, or, by making less dense images, ambrotypes, or tintypes, if the collodion has been flowed on a tin surface painted black instead of a glass plate."*

* Getscher, Robert H., Ambrotypes and Gold Toned Prints: Old Processes, New Photographs, catalogue from the show at John Carroll University, December 2 - 28, 1978.

Thesis Proposal

for

The Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Ambrotype Images

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to make a series of photographic images in the ambrotype medium, exploring its aesthetic possibilities.

submitted by: Thomas P. Feldvebel

Accepted Feb 11, 1980

Thesis board: James Reilly (chairman) James M. Reilly
Irving Pobboravsky Irvin Pobborovsky
Charles Arnold Charles A. Arnold

Scope and Background of the Thesis

I first became involved in making ambrotypes as a student in philosophy several years ago. The dedication required to produce an image in this medium was helpful to me because it introduced a thoughtful attitude toward my work. I actively produced and showed my work until my acceptance in the Master of Fine Arts program at Rochester Institute of Technology.

In Rochester, I questioned the validity of pursuing such a difficult medium without a re-examination of my methods, procedures, and resources. The result was the historical research, methodical testing, and description of the methods of the ambrotype process gathered in a book which I have published; A Modern Manual of Ambrotyping.

I spent my summer of '77 in Penland, N.C., where I continued to work with ambrotypes. There, I began to appreciate specific qualities of the ambrotype which very important to me. The ambrotype is a hand made artifact. This realization grew as I became involved with it as a thing, as will as an image. Glass, velvet, frame, silver, and collodion combine to give forth the perceived image. Still, all of the components retain their separate identities. I was aware of the glass surface, and the pile of the velvet backing when seen through the shadows of the image. The silver, where it creates an

image, also shines like silver; reflecting light in different ways as the image is viewed from different angles. At the edges, the collodion shows its having been poured by hand. The ambrotype is a visually rich medium, combining photographic clarity with a tactile and sensual presence.

My purpose in making ambrotypes is to use a basic process whose origins are historical. We know of them as small, hand held portraits in cases, resembling the rigidly posed daguerreotypes with which they competed for a booming American market in the 1850's and 60's. However, for me this does not mean that today, a visual exploration in this medium can not be exciting and valid. I believe that a new appearance can be brought to the photographic art through a personal imagery grounded in the sensual and visual qualities of the ambrotype. My wish and purpose in this thesis, therefore, is to continue the work I started before the presentation of this proposal, and to acheive a resolution of my thoughts and feelings in this body of work.

Procedures

My images will be mostly 5"x7" in size. I will concentrate on an imagery which deals with places (landscapes) but does not preclude people (portraits). I will sensitize and shoot in the areas of my dwelling: rural westwern N. Y. state, and Cleveland, Ohio, and I will attempt to produce a maximum of 40 images, which can be read down to a manageable show size (25) for the Thesis project. The projected date of the Thesis show will be in early May 1978.

Addendum Note

Within the month following my initial thesis proposal, I was notified that I had a job at Penland School, N.C. as a teaching assistant for the months of June through September. The nature of the school and my position would enable me to pursue my thesis project there. With the approval of my thesis board I arranged to complete my thesis in North Carolina, returning to Rochester for an in-progress conference in July. Also, in the spring ('78) I dropped the initial procedure involving landscape and portrait images, in favor of collage.

The reason that I adopted collage as a method has to do with a growing sensitivity to symbolic and fantasy images, and a need for immediate fantasy depiction using the graphic potentials of the ambrotype medium. Also, I have a great need to remain as close as possible to my sensitizing darkroom in the manipulation of my camera, due to very narrow time and temperature tolerances. In view of this, the collage concept seemed to be good solution. Upon showing examples of my intended work to the thesis board, I was encouraged to continue with the collage experiment.

Report of the Thesis

Forward

Within this report, reference is occasionally made to the visual work of other artists. To protect the copyrights of those artists, copies of representative works have not been placed within the text. Rather, a bibliography has been placed at the end of the report for those interested in examining this material.

First, I would like to explain the origins of my use of porcelain frames for the ambrotypes, because they call to attention the importance of the visual and aesthetic attributes of the ambrotype medium.

The search for an appropriate way of displaying and preserving ambrotypes began four years ago when I first started to make them. After three years of showing ambrotypes mounted in conservation window matts, it became apparent that some of their unique qualities, namely the weight, the glossy surface, the silvery appearance, and even the fact that they are made in an antique medium, were being ignored in the manner of presentation of the images.

In order to emphasize these characteristics, several problems needed to be solved. I was undertaking pre-thesis research at the time, and I realized that the frames had to be made from a heavy, malleable, glass-like material in order to correspond to the glass surface of the ambrotype. It seemed that a ceramic frame could be the answer. The questions relating to the idea of the ceramic frame were the following: first, how could one take advantage of the size, thickness, color, and texture in a way that would enhance the color, brilliance, weight, and the small size of the ambrotype images; second, how could lend an air of self sufficiency and independence to these pieces, apart from conventional display methods? It

became important to lend credence to the method of presentation of the images because of their unusual nature.

I discovered that an arched frame of approximately 9"x11" with an oval or rectangular window, gave just the effect that I desired. It isolated, contained, protected. and sanctified the image that it held. By making the frames of ¼" thick porcelain, and using a light blue high-gloss glaze, I was able to acheive a blue-gray coloration and thickness which when juxtaposed with the ambrotype, created a subtle transition from frame to image which clarified their character.

The porcelain frame project became a fairly lengthy and difficult process due to the need to develop my own formulas for clay and to find a correct method for drying and firing the "green" clay prevent it from cracking and breaking. It was also necessary to find the right combination of kiln temperature and glaze in order to achieve the bluish-grey color that I desired.

Despite the difficulties involved in making them, the porcelain frames turned out to be aesthetically successful. Not only did they isolate, and sanctify the images - but they also merged with the ambrotype itself, suggesting a <u>complete</u> artifact. This allowed me to ignore the modern conventions for the presentation of photographic prints, which encourage the viewer to see the two dimensional print as an image of reality, without regard for the material qualities of the medium.

At that time, I was using magazine advertisements as a source of imagery because I was interested in the contexts of many of the images. My purpose was to draw attention to the different kinds of contexts to which different images belong and to what occurs when these contexts were brought into close proximity with each other. The commercial images that I used were remarkable in their ability to use sexual suggestion in order to persuade the consumer that a product was desirable. This was often accomplished through the blatant use of specific male/female stereotypes. In collecting these images and arranging them with images from my own private and iconographic realm I was concerned with forming a coherent sensibility of design within the overall picture. By using design as the unifying force for the different elements, a photographic tapestry with many inherent levels of meaning was created. Feelings of stress and harmony, nostalgia and impatience could be evoked, and a narrative or story could be suggested within the same image. The juxtaposition of the subtle meanings and allusions in the personal icons, with the more obvious message of the commercial images created new relationships which were visually new and exciting for me.

Working in this way made me aware of a number of elements that I could identify in my work. I had been making "photographic images in the ambrotype medium, exploring its aesthetic possibilities" as I had stated in the proposal. But

I also felt that my endeavor had broadened to include other purposes. They are:

A. Using ambrotypy as a way to explore the subject of photography itself. By this I mean that my work was sensitive to the work of other photographers, and it was being influenced by an increasing knowledge and recognition of the histories of both art and photography.

B. Using ambrotypy as a print making process to explore the textural, visual, and graphic qualities of the collodion positive.

C. Using ambrotypy within an intuitive art photography context to explore, test, and display fantastic and sub-conscious imagery.

The comparison between commercial and private photographic images was especially interesting to me, because it raised questions about how we use visual images to communicate - such as: what sorts of prior expectations do we have about 'art' and 'commercial' images, and; what rules do we employ in 'reading' either art or commercial images? I believe that photographic imagery forms a single level of a very large and versatile body of cultural signs. The use of any of these signs is governed by guidelines and rules which make it possible for the user to communicate. Specific signs

and the guidelines for their use are employed by certain groups of people in order to communicate specific things. In a visual language, images are broadcast in the media, exchanged, answered, modified, and elaborated upon - similar to the way that words are used in verbal dialogue. In this sense it is useful to talk about a visual dialogue. In a visual dialogue such as intiated by commercial advertisement photography, one of the most prominent rules is to form a mystique around a product (Winston cigarettes, for example) in order to induce the consumer to buy it. If the images are weak, or if they do not carry the social and psychological impact necessary to sell the product, then they lose their meaningfulness. Much advertisement imagery eventually becomes outmoded in this way. This is usually due to the use of fad-like popular idioms in order to convey meaning. Eventually as the popular trends change; the images die out. Nevertheless, the images remain as records of the hopes, fantasies, and identities of a specific era.

The fantasy and the surreal spect of many of my images emerges in part,from my awareness of a subconscious and fantastic symbolism in the work of other artists and photographers, as well as in commercial photography. Some of the artists and works that I admire are the 'Fotograms' and photo-montages of László Moholy-Nagy, the photographed constructions of Frederick Sommer, the 'geography book' arangements of Emmett Gowin, and the 'found' images in the

work of Robert Fichter and Robert Heinecken .

During the months that I devoted to the works to be used in the thesis show, I found that the problems imposed by the difficulties of making wet-plate photographs in a humid climate: plate fogging, loss of speed, inconsistancy in coloration of the image; made it necessary for me to devise an image generating situation which would give me more directorial control over the graphic elements of the image. The arangement that I created for this purpose, utilized an 8x10 inch view camera adapted to a 5x7 inch back and holder so that glass wet-plates could be exposed in it. The lens used was 6½ inch Geortz Dagor, at an average camera-to-subject distance of 3 feet. The camera was pointed down toward the floor, where I was able to manipulate various objects and media for the effects that I desired. The objects were then photographed under a combination of flourescent and incandescent lights which were manipulated in order to give a soft, diffuse illumination. This was necessary in order to offset the tendency of the finished ambrotype to look contrasty. At f22, the average exposure was about 70 seconds. This corresponds to an ASA rating for the collodion of approximately .15 .

Often, I would arrange a collaged image over a period of a day, until I felt that it was ready to be photographed.

The arrangement would then be photographed repeatedly until I created an image that pleased me. Sometimes this process would take two or three days due to the hot and humid weather. In this process, I would often change the collaged arrangement, looking at the ambrotypes until I saw the image that satisfied me.

This process of working-out the image gave me time to explore the power of my psyche to generate new graphic images and to explore the possibilities of the medium under the natural restrictions of the time. This method of working is similar to that employed by Man Ray in his 'Ray-o-graphs' of 1921, and the 'Fotograms' of László Moholy-Nagy. Both artists were exploring the image generating possibilities of a medium which was new to them (both were painters). They approached photography with an open eye for the latent possibilities of the medium as a new tool for making images. They did not pay great attention to the traditional uses of photography as a straightforward, representational medium. Rather, they looked upon photography as the ultimate form of non-objective expression; what Moholy-Nagy has termed, the 'de-materialized' medium.

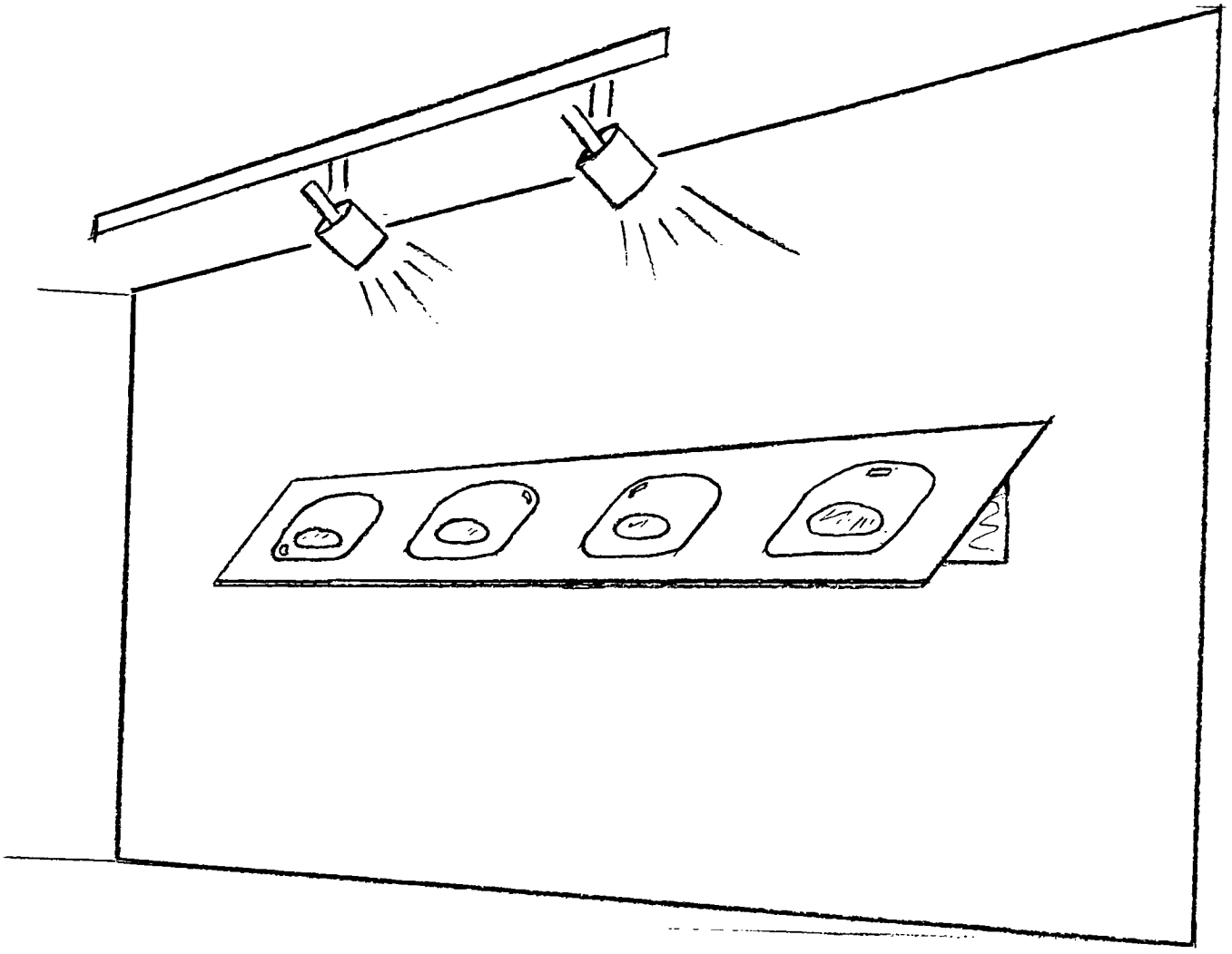
Over the course of four months of daily involvement in this process of making images, it became apparent to me that beyond a certain point I stopped making 'ambrotypes'. I simply lost awareness that I was working with an antique

process. I realized that I was a changing agent in the creative process.

In acuiring an opportunity for quick image feedback, similar to a polaroid picture (the image is ready to be viewed 5 minutes after exposure in the camera) - I began to discover some of the fundamental reasons for my involvement with ambrotypy, and more generally, with image making. This occured to me not as an intellectual observation, but as a feeling about my work that I had never had before.

What happened was that I became aware that unusual images seemed to happen of their own volition. As I have mentioned above, sometimes I would set up an arrangement and then proceed to photograph it over a period of several days, sometimes exposing 30 to 40 plates. Often, although I had done everything to make the image right, I could not get an image exactly the way that I wanted it. This could have been either due to disturbances in light, arrangement, or chemistry. Suddenly, after several days of unsatisfactory results, I would made an image which would stun me with its 'rightness'. How did it happen? I am not quite sure but, I do feel that despite my efforts to control the image, when a remarkable image occured, it was as if I was learning a great deal from it. Often, it was in the form of a quality of feeling in the work that had not been intended.

During the final meeting with my thesis board, I displayed work to be shown during the thesis exhibit, and received comments and criticism. The board agreed that the work was good providing that it was hung with careful consideration for sequencing and grouping. It was noted that the silvery and reflective quality of the images was an important part of my work, aesthetically, and that it would be extremely important for me to hang the pieces in such a way that would allow the viewer to see this effect. This led me to make a series of shelves to be fitted to gallery walls, mounted at an angle from the vertical so that the pieces could be fastened to it using special mounting pins. Using these shelves, it was possible to adjust the lighting so that a person of any height could see the silvery reflections of the images at some point while moving toward the display. The shelves were constructed and mounted in a manner which is sketched in the following drawing:



The shelves made it possible to draw attention to this effect which otherwise would have been missed. A measure of how important the shelf concept was is borne out by the fact that I still exhibit all of my pieces (wherever I have control of the mounting proceedure) mounted on angled shelves.

Finally, I would like to present some excerpts from a catalogue of a show that I had at John Carroll University, Cleveland, Ohio. The comments are written by Dr. Robert H. Getscher, and the show was entitled; Ambrotypes and Gold Toned Prints: Old Processes, New Photographs.

> ...Feldvebel has pursued this arcane (ambrotype) process because of its unique visual qualities.
>
> Perhaps these qualities can best be seen in the images he has placed in ceramic frames, rounded and glazed silver, like the plates of glass they hold. There are swirls, marks and irregularities in the very making and flowing of the emulsion that is reinforced by these frames. And there is a reflective quality to the image. We are looking through the glass at a thin layer of silver that is held in the transparent collodion. Where the light was strongly reflected into the camera the silver is a mirror-like surface, and even shines in certain lights. In darker areas the bits of silver are more widespread, producing greys. Where there is no silver at all, we see through clear collodion to the velvet behind, or , in Feldvebel's earlier images, the back of the glass was covered by a permanent layer of black enamel. In some cases, where there are large areas of black, the texture of the velvet shows through. But in all cases there is a feeling of something precious, special illusionary.

Light hit a particular object a particular way one particular moment. This created a unique image; the object could be photographed again, but the light, and thus the essence of the scene would change.

The porcelain-framed images are Feldvebel's most recent. Almost all of them are of small objects photographed together on a table top. Many were done for purely aesthetic reasons. Alfalfa is just a collection of images and objects he liked. They were placed on a grid background "like graph paper in a mathematician's notebook," he told me, to relate and draw together disparate objects. The grid heightens the irregularities of the objects photographed. Alfalfa is one of the first ambrotypes Feldvebel did in this series. Each of the objects is personal: the daguerreotype in the left corner belongs to the photogapher, he grew the alfalfa in his garden, the wasp's nest was found right over his setup in the rafters of the barn that served as his studio, the nuts came from walks in the woods nearby, the reproduction of an etching came out of a magazine, but each of these objects was included more for their reflective qualities than for any inherent symbolism. The nuts are dark, the daguerreotype, shining silver. "I notice the brass mat that goes around it, the square thing that it is, the picture." This representational image is photographed, the other one drawn. Both static images are countered by the alfalfa plant, fresh and alive, right out of the ground, its "leaves almost blowing in the breeze," a living force. All of this variety has been brought together, carefully ordered on the grid, and homogenized into a single silver image. Even the wasp's nest echoes the grid, a kind of home, "it is a nest from which things are born and leave." Not only does the grid order these objects, but it serves as a foil to their dimensionality; note the firm thick shadow around the daguerreotype, and the subtly undulating one around the print of the Africans, as the paper of this reproduction curls in space.

SX-70 takes its name from the Polaroid snapshot of one Feldvebel's setups on the right of the ambrotype. He likes butterflies, and keeps dead ones that he finds because they are pretty, but the yellow-jackets that live above his setup come down and eat the bodies, leaving onle the wings behind. So here only a butterfly wing and a withered rose are left to embellish his daguerreotype; still, these are all precious objects, while the giant bug bisecting the image is not. The shot from the SX-70 camera is hard, slick, pure, anonymous; "it is merely an image surface, while the daguerreotype is interesting all over." Yet both of these are unique images, the single result of the act of the photographer. In that sense they conceptually relate to our image of them, the ambrotype.

The Christ is also on a grid, but now the images have more meaning to Feldvebel, they are public manifestations of a private iconography. Even the accidental flow of the developer can be seen on the surface, activating the image and making it more dynamic. The background grid is no longer white, but deliberately painted grey and dirty; its lines are not neatly drawn but scraped into the surface of the paint with a blade. The grid has become more specific; it is not as anonymous as in the earlier examples. Christ seems to be looking out of a firm, dark cloud--the skin of a dried up pumpkin. The holy card was from a friend, a conventional religious symbol, but the moth is a more generalized one of "high spirituality; they are powerful and command a lot of respect. They are awesome to behold, even when they are dead." Moths have strong visual and psychological impact with eyes upon their soft brown wings. "When I see one my heart leaps a little bit." In Christ there is an ordering of values, separating good things from bad. The huge bug, almost four inches long, is on the far right, ugly and evil. The white next to it is styrofoam

cold and emotionless, terribly white, colder than an iceberg, reflecting a great deal of ultra-violet light. The pumpkin paper is rich, full of life and spirit; it and the styrofoam symbolize the difference between being and non-being. Small arms reach out from the moth to Christ. The whole arrangement is almost like the medieval tympanum of a church, the sculpture above the entrance, with the damned to the left of Christ and the blessed to his right.

A more contemporaty concern with good and evil can be seen in No Smoking. Feldvebel is fascinated but horrified by the powerful beauty of Madison Avenue - created images that promote smoking in this country. Their planned casualness is sometimes the result of composite photography, as rugged eyes are airbrushed into a photograph of a firm mose, creating a frontal,hypnotic, sexual image. His fist "is my personal stamp, violating and interrupting their message. They look out at you, I'm taking them and looking back at them, robbing them of their integrity." Throughout No Smoking there are various images that unite together: an arm seems to reach out from the man to join hands with the girl, and the Coke bottle becomes one with the moth. The bottle not only reinforces the flatness of the table top by rising up out of the focal plane, but it is such a ubiquitous object that even from this strange angle it is instantly recognizable. Coke is as ever present as cigarettes, both symbols of today.

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Robert H. Getscher, PhD
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John Carroll University

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Robert Heinecken*

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Frederick Sommer*

* - The photographs of these artists are represented in the photographic archives at the International Museum of Photography , George Eastman House.


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